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WORLD NEWS

Life in Basra Goes On Behind Sandbags in
'War of Cities'

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Los Angeles Times

BASRA, Iraq, March 28—The city is usually still asleep when the first shells start to fall on Basra. A thin gray sky hugs the Shatt al Arab waterway as an artillery piece is fired in the distance, sounding like a vacuum cleaner being switched on down a long corridor.

The shell lands with a shattering blast only 40 yards from a hotel on the edge of the waterway, sending up a large plume of smoke. It has hit a house.

With the explosion still echoing through the town, residents emerge from their doorways in bathrobes and begin scurrying down the dusty streets toward shelters, which are marked with a sign showing a stick-figure man running like a track star.

An air raid siren begins to wail, and the residents peek nervously down the street. But as the siren dies, people already have begun drifting back to their homes.

It is another day in the increasingly destructive "war of the cities," the latest phase in the grisly 4½ years of combat between Iraq and Iran.

Between last night and this morning alone, the Iranians said Iraqi warplanes killed 39 persons and wounded more than 250, the largest one-day casualty toll in the war against civilian areas.

So far, 67 people have been killed and about 400 wounded in Tehran, demonstrating that even the Iranian capital is vulnerable to devastating attack.

As the war has worn on, strategies have shifted. After both sides failed to win a decisive victory early in the war, each thought it could prevail by attacking commercial shipping bound for the other side in the Persian Gulf.

But the attacks on shipping failed to bring either country to its knees so they began attacking civilian targets in hopes of spreading enough fear to force the other side to capitulate or agree to negotiate a comprehensive peace settlement.

"Our bombs will continue falling on their heads," an Iraqi military spokesman said, "so long as they continue the aggression and

unless they submit to our just will for a comprehensive peace."

Western diplomats in Baghdad say Iraq apparently believes Iran used the lull in attacks on civilian targets last year to prepare for the offensive it launched two weeks ago. The assault was repulsed by Iraq with heavy Iranian casualties. Iraq is said to believe that Iran shelters its fighting forces in civilian areas.

The superior Iraqi Air Force has about 500 combat aircraft, mainly French-supplied F1 Mirages and Soviet warplanes, while Iran has only 80 operating aircraft, according to reliable intelligence estimates. The result is that Iraq is flying hundreds of bombing sorties a day against Iranian cities.

With its Air Force all but grounded, Iran has had to content itself with retaliating for the air raids with sporadic long-distance attacks—the Iranians assert they are firing missiles on Baghdad—and more frequent artillery barrages against Iraqi border towns, especially this southern seaport city.

Actually, Basra is now a seaport in name only since the Iranians closed the Shatt al

Arab—the waterway to the Persian Gulf—to shipping in the early days of the war. Seventy-one vessels have been trapped here for four years, riding in the gentle brown current and gathering rust.

The city's normal peacetime population is 1.5 million, although after two weeks of daily shelling, it is hard to believe Basra is that big. The streets are virtually deserted during daylight, with most shops closed behind iron grills.

Millions of sandbags have been formed into miles of protective walls that run down sidewalks on the western sides of the streets, where the shells fired from Iran in the east are expected to fall.

Even the portraits of President Saddam Hussein, which are omnipresent on street corners throughout Iraq, have taken on a martial quality in Basra, showing him in combat gear and a helmet.

"In the days of the valiant knight," says a poster in a hospital, "Saddam Hussein the leader revives the splendid glory of the Arabs."

Two weeks ago, Basra was subjected to

Continued

shelling for hours at a time, with huge explosions every 20 seconds. Now, the shelling is more sporadic.

At the largely empty Basra Sheraton, desk clerks warn guests with mystifying prescience of artillery shelling expected at 6 p.m. Guests take their cocktails at a basement bar, and the prophesied shells arrive with a great whoosh on the dot.

While the shelling has greatly diminished in recent days, the threat of further shelling alone has been sufficient to keep people away from the city.

City officials said during a recent tour by foreign journalists that they had no figures on the casualties in Basra but several have been killed and dozens injured.

A school and a hospital that were hit by shells are displayed with particular indignation by authorities here, who have opened a museum dedicated to the "martyrs of the Persian aggressive shelling."

"This crime will not go unpunished," said one Iraqi official of Iran's shelling. "We will retaliate against the Iranian rulers' savagery until they cease committing such crimes."